DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 409 873 IR 018 462

AUTHOR	Streibel, Michael J.
TITLE	Information Technology, Community, Place, and Presence.
PUB DATE	97
NOTE	8p.; In: Proceedings of Selected Research and Development Presentations at the 1997 National Convention of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (19th, Albuquerque, NM, February 14-18, 1997); see IR 018 421.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Abstract Reasoning; *Community; Electronic Libraries; Group Experience; *Human Relations; *Information Technology; *Internet; *Interpersonal Relationship; Online Systems; Physical Geography; Social Integration; Technological Advancement; *Virtual Reality
IDENTIFIERS	Physical Properties; Physical Proximity; *Physical State

ABSTRACT

The Internet introduces something quite new into ordinary everyday communication. It is now possible to carry on extensive interactions with other people without being fully present or even identifying oneself. While this has always been the case to some extent with the use of written and printed communication, as well as with telephone, radio, and television communication, the Internet takes these trends to new levels of abstraction. The Internet provides: (1) abstract representations of place and information--such as virtual libraries, virtual offices, and virtual communities; (2) abstract representations of self and other--through text descriptions and avatars; and (3) abstract representations of interactions--such as intelligent tutoring systems and automated workflow processes. This paper stresses for the importance of physical place and physical presence in how people construct meanings in their lives, how they form personal biographies and public histories, and how they develop living communities. The paper contrasts this stance with the consequences of the abstractions of place and presence in virtual, on-line communities. (Contains 13 references.) (Author/SWC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 409 873

Information Technology, Community, Place, and Presence

Michael J. Streibel
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Abstract

This paper argues for the importance of physical place and physical presence in how we construct meanings in our lives, how we form personal biographies and public histories, and how we develop living communities. This stance is contrasted with the consequences of the abstractions of place and presence in virtual, on-line communities.

Introduction

I am going to raise a number of questions about information technology which I hope will extend the discussion into areas that are important in our personal and public lives. The questions come out of two very different views within the public discourse about the role of information technology in our lives. Let me call one the technological vision and the other the experiential vision.

The technological vision of life in the future is captured very well by Nicholas Negroponte in his book *Being Digital* when he says:

> Digital living will include less and less dependence upon being in a specific place at a specific time. (165)

It is also captured by William J. Mitchell in his book *City of Bits* when he says:

> The virtual communities that networks bring together are often defined by common interests rather than by common location. (116)

Where, literally, does digital living and virtual community really leave us?

The experiential vision, on the other hand, is captured well by Thomas Moore in his book *Care of the Soul*, when he claims that:

> The soul prospers in an environment that is concrete, particular, and vernacular. (25)

Soul here is not meant to be a metaphysical entity like a ghost in a machine but the *quality of a relationship one has with particular people, places, and situations*. I will, therefore, speak of the soulfulness of place in order to stay focused on the secular and vernacular. Later, I will also speak of spiritedness.

These two vision of the future are clearly being put to the test by networked information technologies that virtualize people, places, and communities. I will also, therefore, try to stay focused on the importance of physical places and physical communities in our lives while always keeping an eye on the alternate claims of the technological vision.

At this point, I want to remind you of a cartoon that recently appeared in the *New Yorker* because it captures many of the points I will make throughout this paper. In this cartoon, two dogs are facing a computer and the older dog says to the younger dog: "On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog." As you can see, the internet introduces something quite new into ordinary everyday communication. We can now carry on extensive interactions with other people without being fully present or even fully ourselves. In a way, this has always been the case with the use of written and printed communication, as well as with telephone, radio, and television communication. However, the internet takes these trends to new levels of abstraction because we now have:

1. abstract representations of place and information (e.g., virtual libraries, virtual offices, virtual workgroups, MUDs, MOOs, virtual communities),
2. abstract representations of self and other (e.g., text descriptions, avatars), and,
3. abstract representations of interactions (e.g., intelligent tutoring systems, automated workflow processes).

These trends will no doubt continue. However, I have a questions about these trends: what do we need to attend to as we move bravely into a cyber future? The answer is surprisingly simple: we need to attend to our physical bodies, our physical settings, and our physical communities. As the phenomenologist David Abrams says in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, the reason is that we are embedded in *a physical matrix of human and more-than-human beings*. Furthermore, within this physical matrix, as the deep ecologist George Sessions says in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, meaningful work and meaningful life requires that we experience meaningful connections. Meaningful connections, in turn, as Dolores LaChapelle, another deep ecologist says in George

IR 018462

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
M. Simonsen
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Sessions book and in *Earth Wisdom*, require an "intimate, conscious relationship with [a] place," and "a stable, sustainable culture."(57) I will address each of these separately before turning to computer networks and community.

In summary for now, however, the choices we face have to do with coming to terms with the two tendencies of the technological and the experiential visions. Alan Drengson, in his study of *The Practice of Technology*, captures these tendencies when he says that:

> The industrial paradigm of development is based on monoculture, uniformity, speed, and abstraction, all of which run counter to the natural inclinations toward place-specific wisdom, diversity, accumulation of tradition and values, and sense of community, self-worth, integrity, value and meaning. (99)

Physical Places

I have a question for each of you. Think about the offices you are returning to after this conference. Think about the homes and apartments you are returning to later in the week. What do you want from these physical places? Normally, we do not have to ask these questions: *living places* and *working places* are two different places with their own rules and conditions. In our homes or apartments, we assume that we can arrange things in any way that we want in order to suit our desires. However, as William Mitchell says:

> The domestic living room is emerging as a major site at which digitally-displaced activities are recombining and regrounding themselves in the physical world. (98)

Later, he goes on to say that our "buildings will become computer interfaces, and our computer interfaces will become buildings." (105) *Our living places in a digital world*, in other words, *are no longer solely sites for our inhabitation.*

In our work places, we have already conceded inhabitation. They are, after all, continually being redesigned to foster economic efficiency and productivity. However, even here we may be showing signs of wanting some measure of control over changes. That is, even though we accept automated manufacturing with computerized robots in our factories and automated business processes or administrative processes with networked computers in our offices, *we still believe that the technology should be wrapped around us and not the other way around.* Why is this?

I am going to offer one of several possible answers: we are embodied in physical (and not virtual) bodies and we are situated in physical (and not virtual) locations. The fact that networked communications technologies allow our eyes and ears to sense information from other times and places ignores the fact that *our lifeworld is situated in the physical here and now*. We are, in effect, working here even though information is brought to us from elsewhere over networks. All important aspects of working and learning happen in the here and now in our physical bodies. Or, as Thomas Moore says in *Care of the Soul*:

> The love that goes out into our work comes back as love of self. Signs of this love and therefore of soul are feelings of attraction, desire, curiosity, involvement, passion, and loyalty in relation to our work. (187)

Hence, even in our work world, we have to attend to our physical place and presence if we are going to have any of these feelings.

Given these experiential facts, what can we learn *from* our physical bodies and *from* our physical places? Why are these questions even important? Moore again provides an answer:

> The body's changes teach us about fate, time, nature, mortality, and character. Aging forces us to decide what is important in life. (216)

The same can be said about physical places. The questions then become: do virtual bodies and virtual places teach any of us these things? Let me continue to answer these questions in a roundabout way.

Christopher Day, one of the seminal architects of our time who wrote *Places of the Soul*, begins to answer these questions quite simply: we are deeply affected by the physical places where we live and work, and, *our physical as well as psychological and social health depends on designing health-giving physical places*. How can we do this if we are handed ready-made workplaces? According to Day, we can design health-giving physical places if we:

1. listen to what the physical place, the moment, and the community ask for,
2. inhabit the physical places our bodies are in, and,
3. make our environment a part of our biography and history.

I have summarized these ideas in the graphic below:

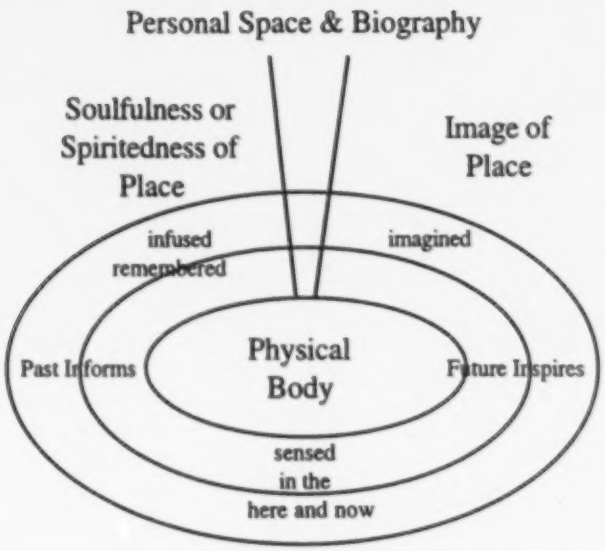

Figure 1. Personal Space and Biography

How many of you enter a new workplace or a new office and immediately put your stamp on the place? I suspect each of you has a unique story. In Day's terms, you have begun to affect the 'spirit of the place.' Now, as I said earlier about soul, spirit is not some metaphysical substance but a quality or pattern of a place. That is why I use the word spiritedness rather than spirit. Other people who come by and engage you in your workplace will immediately recognize this new spiritedness. Furthermore, the more you work in a physical place, the more you infuse it with your spiritedness. The more others engage you, the more you *co-create a public space*. This, in turn, creates a common history that is tied to a specific place. I have summarized these ideas in another graphic below:

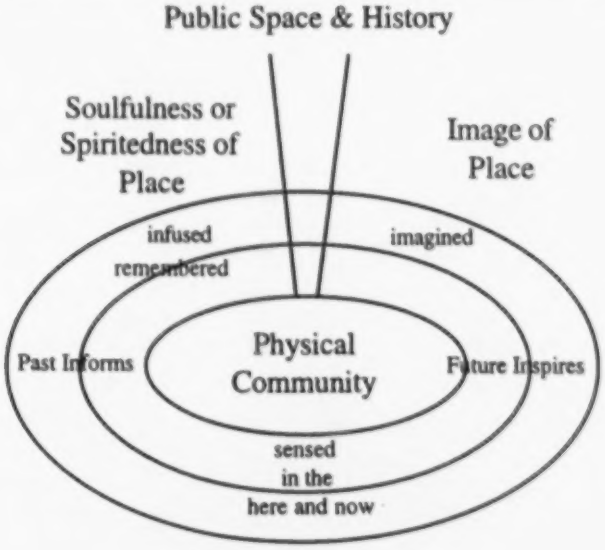

Figure 2. Public Space and History

Let me take this line of inquiry one step further. How many of you have resisted strenuously when someone else tried to change these personal arrangements? I think we have all had this experience. Was this just personal ideosyncraticness? I think not. In Day's terms, the place and its surroundings had in some small way become part of your biography and history. This is not to suggest that the place and its surroundings defined your identity but rather that *the care which you infused into your environment changed your experience of the place and also changed other people's experience of you and your interaction with that place*. These unique experiences are now part of your biographies and histories with these other people and places. Years from now, people will still remember the particularities of these times and places. The soulfulness and spiritedness of people and places are both sensed in real time and remembered by people. It binds them into a group of people that is more than a collection of individuals but rather an historical community.

Can virtual places be infused with a similar soulfulness or spiritedness? Can virtual places go beyond being functional, economically efficient places? Before addressing these questions, let me expand the discussion briefly to include the notion of community because it contains some elements that will help us with our answers.

Community and Place

Why is it important to dwell in a physical place? Why not just keep our living places and our work places separate? Thoreau and Leopold come to mind here. They went off alone to separate physical places - Thoreau to Walden Pond and Leopold to Sand County, Wisconsin - and reported back what they learned. Their main insights were that their physical places were part of a larger community of interconnected places and that all human and non-human beings were part of a larger community of beings. Today, we refer to these two interconnections as ecology and Gaia. Abrams talks about how *human beings are embedded with a more-than-human world*. However, I would like to narrow my focus on the connections between human communities and places without losing sight of these larger connections.

Daniel Kemmis, in his study of *Community and the Politics of Place*, explicitly connects citizenship with the inhabitation of physical places.

> Public life [he says] can only be reclaimed by understanding, and then practicing, its connection to real, identifiable places. (6)

Kemmis further claims that since community and public life go together, community can only be realized in practice by people who have:

1. a living, working relationship to a physical place,
2. a stake in each other's lives,
3. a commitment to human virtues such as neighborliness,
4. a trusted pattern of behaviors, and,
5. an objectivity about what works and what does not work

"No real culture," he concludes, "can exist in abstraction from place." (7)

The question then becomes, can communities exist in virtual places? After all, since much of social reality is continually negotiated through communication, why not just extend communication to include telecommunications such as interactive video and the internet? However, what do the five points above mean if we extend the meaning of each term to encompass virtual interaction? I offer these questions as a beginning for further discussion:

1. Can one have a *living relationship* within a virtual place? We already see examples of having *working relationships* with virtual people and places. Living relationships, however, entail experiencing local patterns that connect one to larger patterns in the more-than-human world.
2. Do we have a mutual stake in each other's lives when the Other is at a virtual distance and only a representation? My tentative answer is that it gets harder and harder to have such a stake.
3. Can we sustain the human virtue of neighborliness when the virtual medium permits anonymity and the possibility of continual disconnection? No!
4. What trusted pattern of behaviors can conjointly be constructed with another person or place at a distance other than computational rules such as work-flow processes or stereotypical expectations? We would all have to operate according to the same abstractions for this to ever work in any sustainable way.
5. How can we maintain a pragmatic objectivity when virtual worlds and places can be modified at will? I am not sure what pragmatism means in a totally constructed virtual environment.

> Pragmatism seems a matter of predefinition in such virtual environments whereas it is not a matter of predefinition in environments of living relationships.

All of these specific questions really come down to two different models of community. Following Kemmis and also Michael Sandel in his *Democracy's Discontents*, I will call these the engagement and procedural models.

In a deep sense, the specific questions above and the two underlying models of community are really as old as our Republic itself because they appeared in the debates between Jefferson and Madison about what type of Constitution we really wanted. Jefferson believed that we should have a government through a *politics of engagement at the local community level*. Madison and the Federalists, on the other hand, believed that we should have a procedural Republic through a *politics of radical disengagement*. Jefferson, therefore, believed that people had to face each other in person, accept responsibility for their objective situations, and then work out common pragmatic solutions. Madison, on the other hand, wanted to keep people apart and use federal checks and balances and procedures to smooth the way for the growth of commerce. The Federalists won out in the writing of the Constitution. However, both sides realized that the debate would continue and so looked to the frontier and the creation of new States as an opportunity to realize their respective visions.

Today, it seems as if the global communications networks in general and the internet in particular are the new frontier where we can escape from each other's physical presence and avoid having to deal with the physical problems of communal living by forming virtual identities and virtual communities. The drive towards global economics still fuels these very developments. However, two things just don't seem to go away, one old and one new. On the one hand, we still reside in our physical bodies, we still inhabit physical places, and we still have to get along with our physical communal neighbors. This may account for the continuing appeal of Jeffersonian democratic ideals. On the other hand, we have now reached the global limits of the earth in our attempt to commercialize people and places. At both the personal and the global levels, therefore, we now have to face the physical demands of people and places.

Networks, Community, and Place

Stephan Talbott, in his book *The Future Does Not Compute*, poses a provocative question: "can human ideals survive the internet?" (1) He then goes on to list the public relations benefits attributed to the internet:

1. "extended democracy,
2. personal liberation,
3. enhanced powers of organization and coordination,
4. renewal of community,
5. information transmuted into wisdom,
6. education freed from the grip of pedagogical tyranny,
7. a new and wonderous complexity arising out of chaos." (1)

The problem with the internet, however, is that it is "mostly a means for technical information exchange." It is not a "means of solving the primacy of personal relationship and community in a depersonalized society." (2) These latter things do not just happen because:

> every ideal worthy of the name can only be realized through some sort of *conscious struggle and achievement*. (3)

Hence, developing community requires a "constant struggle and commitment," a "charitable spirit," and "confronting of self with other rather than hiding behind stereotypes and representations." Here, we return to the Jeffersonian ideal of the politics of engagement in community building.

Let me give you one specific example of a current struggle that can be seen from the two perspectives: the issue of privacy on the internet. Following Talbott, the engagement approach to privacy is based on:

1. interpersonal respect between human beings,
2. a continuous struggle and commitment by community members, and,
3. a constant reflection and understanding of the quality of human relationship as it relates to rights and responsibilities.

The technological approach to privacy on the internet, on the other hand, is based on (5):

1. "technically-shielded anonymity",
2. "unaware and unthinking others unless the technological walls [passwords and firewalls] are broken",
3. "legal sanctions as protection", and,
4. "constant technological improvements and countermeasures".

As you can see, the former requires that people be fully present and committed to each other. The latter allows people to "retreat into communal abstractions." (140) Talbot, therefore, concludes that the biggest danger of the internet is that it "deemphasi[zes] ... people who are fully present." (140) This, in turn, undermines community.

Conclusion

I want to end this discussion with a series of questions and some tentative, personal answers. The global internet phenomenon is so recent, swift, and total that questions and tentative answers are the best way to sort out all of the issues. I invite you to participate by offering your own tentative answers. In giving these personal answers, I will try to make the case for the importance of caring for our own physical presence, our physical settings, and our physical communities.

Question 1: Why is it important to spend each day connected to and caring for our physical bodies and the physical places where we live?

My own tentative answers are because:

1. *disconnection of physical self and place* could lead to disconnection from others and a subsequent loss of communal life which I value.
2. daily reconnection reinvigorates being an inclusive subject in my life rather than being an object in someone else's life.

Question 2: What happens when the bulk of our daily experiences, work, and learning takes place in virtualized, on-line communities?

My own tentative answers are that in virtual communities:

1. I begin to interact with computationally-mediated intermediaries and may begin to see myself and others in similar terms. This is not how I want to see myself or others.
2. all local particularities of person, place, and situation fade into the background. This is not how I want to experience the world. I actually want every local experience to connect me in some small way to the larger patterns of the more-than-human world.
3. what is communicated by others is an idealized, objectified, computationally-represented pattern of information rather than a fully sensuous, material being. Such a being entails the full range of intelligences described by Howard Gardner in *Frames of Mind* and all the patterns of embodied, natural intelligence described by Donna Markova in *The Open Mind*.

Question 3: Why do we need to deal with people face-to-face rather than at a virtual distance?

My tentative answer is that I want to notice and interact with people daily in order to:

1. gain greater *understanding of myself as a social being*, and,
2. *co-create a lifeworld* with other people in specific places.

Question 4: Why should we open ourselves up to the experience of our physicality and our physical situatedness in the here and now?

My tentative answer is best described by David Abrams in his study of the *Spell of the Sensuous* (1996) where he said that:

> *the world and I reciprocate one another* [such that] ... *our spontaneous experience of the world* [is] charged with subjective, emotional, and intuitive content [and] *remains the vital foreground of all our objectivity*. (33-34) [my empahsis]

These experiences then become the grounds of my being and, through empathy, the basis of my recognizing others as subjects. The experience of *self-as embodied-subject* and *other-as-embodied-subject* leads to the experience of *community-as-embodied-subject* and even to the experience of *world-as embodied-subject*. All of these together are my main source for objectivity and my arena for the development of pragmatism.

Question 5: Why should we develop a physically-present community before we extend it with virtual communications technologies?

My tentative answers are that:

1. my immediate lived experience will always be prior to my thoughts about it.
2. If I do choose to ignore my lived experience, I might be denying myself the ability to develop new concepts and understandings.

My tentative answers here are not meant to suggest that we should deny the value or practice of virtual communities but rather that we should give precedence to our physical community, place, and presence in our lives.

These questions and tentative answers are really my way of continuing an inquiry. In a strange and ironic way, the internet phenomenon has forced me to ask questions about my physical self, my physical setting, and my physical community which I previously took for granted.

I will end this paper with a few lines from T.S. Eliot's poem *Little Gidding:*

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

References

Abrams, D. (1996). *The Spell of the Sensuous*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Day, C. (1990). *Places of the Soul*. Mannersmith, London: Aquarian/Thorsons.

Drengson, A. (1995). *The Practice of Technology*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Eliot, T. S. (1995). *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of Mind*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Kemmis, D. (1990). *Community and the Politics of Place*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

La Chapelle, D. (1978). *Earth Wisdom*. Silverton, CO: Fine Hill Arts.

Markova, D. (1996). *The Open Mind*. Berkeley, CA: Conari Press.

Mitchell, W. J. (1995). *City of Bits*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Moore, T. (1992). *Care of the Soul*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Negroponte, N. (1995). *Being Digital*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Sandel, M. J. (1996). *Democracy's Discontents*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Talbott, S. L. (1995). *The Future Does Not Compute*. Sebastopos, CA: O'Reilly & Associates.